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Progress for CAFTA/Coleman, Kennedy Say Yes

President Bush created a real dilemma for Minnesota's congressional delegation last year when he proposed a new free-trade agreement with six countries in Central America and the Caribbean. Should they support the pact, which promises modest but important benefits to consumers and substantial export opportunities for many Minnesota industries, or should they side with the state's sugar industry, a large and vocal opponent?

So it was good to see Sen. Norm Coleman and Rep. Mark Kennedy, both Republicans, give the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) a firm endorsement last week. Coleman and Kennedy share a sophisticated take on economics and a shrewd reading of congressional politics. Coleman's support contributed to CAFTA's passage in the Senate last Thursday night, and Kennedy's vote could prove pivotal when CAFTA comes up in the House later this summer. The issues are nuanced and difficult, but we hope the rest of the delegation follows their lead.

No one dismisses the worries of Minnesota's sugar beet growers, who account for 2,500 jobs along the state's western border and \$2.3 billion of economic activity, and who fear a surge in imports of Central American sugar. But one industry should not stand in the way of a trade pact that would boost exports for thousands of other farmers and manufacturers, while lowering prices for American consumers and creating jobs for developing nations in Central America. Moreover, the sugar industry won substantial safeguards when the pact was negotiated, and Coleman strengthened them last week with a provision saying that any sugar surpluses caused by CAFTA, beyond a certain threshold, would be removed from the food market and used for ethanol.

Supporting CAFTA will be even tougher for Democrats in the Minnesota delegation, who have doubts about the president's trade agenda and concerns about CAFTA's impact on labor rights. But the pact actually improves on existing labor protections for Central American workers, and careful studies by independent economists suggest that the pact is likely to bring lower prices for consumers on both sides of the deal while strengthening the developing economies of Central America.

CAFTA could be improved in any number of ways, from its intellectual-property provisions to its labor protections. But the overall thrust will open markets and sharpen competition on both sides of the transaction, and that's a gain worth supporting.